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SUBJECT: BANI ASAD SHEIKH ON AUGUST 16 ATTACK AND SECURITY

REF: BASRAH 132

CLASSIFIED BY: Ken Gross, Regional Coordinator, REO Basrah, DOS.

REASON: 1.4 (b)

11. (C) Summary. The Regional Coordinator (RC) and Deputy RC met with Bani Asad tribal leader Sheikh Hassan al-Asad on September 12. Sheikh Hassan expressed concern over Basrah's dismal security situation and provided background on his tribe's August 16 attack on the Basrah government building. Sheikh Hassan said that the Basrah Provincial Council (BPC) and the governor formed a secret committee to investigate the murders of his son and nephew, the events that precipitated the attack. Sheikh Hassan said that establishing a safe and secure environment is the paramount concern in Basrah. End summary.

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The Government Building Attack  
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12. (C) The Regional Coordinator (RC) and Deputy RC met with Sheikh Hassan al-Asad of the Bani Asad tribe on September 12, and he recounted the events leading up to the August 16 attack on the Basrah government building (see reftel). According to Sheikh Hassan, the attack was a spontaneous act that erupted when young members of the Bani Asad tribe were goaded into action by militia members who had joined the funeral procession of his nephew hours earlier. Sheikh Hassan said that his nephew, an Iraqi police officer, was murdered the day before the attack for "being in league with the Coalition Forces." Calling the subsequent attack against the symbol of government wrong and claiming that as soon as he heard about it he called off his tribesmen, he said that he wanted to make sure that the RC understood that the Bani Asad tribe was peaceful in nature and against the kind of violence that is permeating Basrah. His nephew's murder was the second death in the family. Earlier the Sheikh's only son, also an Iraqi police officer, was murdered for the same reason, according to his father.

13. (C) In dealing with the aftermath of the attack on the government building, Sheikh Hassan said that a number of other tribes offered assistance, but he refused the offers since they would "only escalate the situation." He explained that the governor and BPC established a secret investigative committee to determine the facts behind his son and his nephew's murders. The committee started its investigation shortly after the last assassination, but Sheikh Hassan had no further information about it. Sheikh Hassan asked the RC to help move the investigation along, and the RC replied that he would try to obtain information on the committee. Sheikh Hassan refused to ascribe blame for the murders to any particular individual or group. There is, he said, no active police investigation into either murder.

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¶4. (C) Sheikh Hassan said that the Basrah security committee formed by the Prime Minister in July is "good," but it will be ineffective unless all of the political parties agree to cooperate and work with it. He identified unemployment as the biggest problem facing Basrah, noting that Iraqi Army members dismissed after the fall of Saddam had "no jobs, nothing." To feed their families, they and other jobless persons turn to militias for employment.

¶5. (C) Comment. As one of the elders of the Bani Asad tribe, reportedly the largest tribe in Iraq with over one and a half million members, Sheikh Hassan is a steady and measured speaker and is unique among the tribal leaders in the south - he was well-reasoned and did not try to place blame on other tribes or individuals for any of Basrah's many problems. Claiming that his tribe stood for peace, he emphasized that security is his main concern, saying that he would prefer "to be safe than to have food" if he had to choose. He is concerned about the young members of his tribe, the lack of opportunities in present day Basrah for them, and what this may portend for the future. He also made an interesting comparison between the old tribes and the "newer" tribes he said were formed during Saddam's reign. Sheikh Hassan said the new tribes are weak and are unable to provide a strong enough bond to prevent its young members from defecting to the militias. Overall, Sheikh Hassan is a thoughtful leader concerned about the future of his tribe. End Comment.

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